

## Introduction:

In December of 2006, I commissioned and paid Gene Bullard to write a series of articles for RodMaker Magazine detailing certain historical aspects of our craft. As someone with an intimate knowledge of rod building history, Gene was very much up to the task.

We titled the series “Classics.” I provided the topics and Gene wrote the articles - usually within a single day of my topic suggestion.

What follows is a compilation of those articles as they appeared in RodMaker in 2007 and 2008.

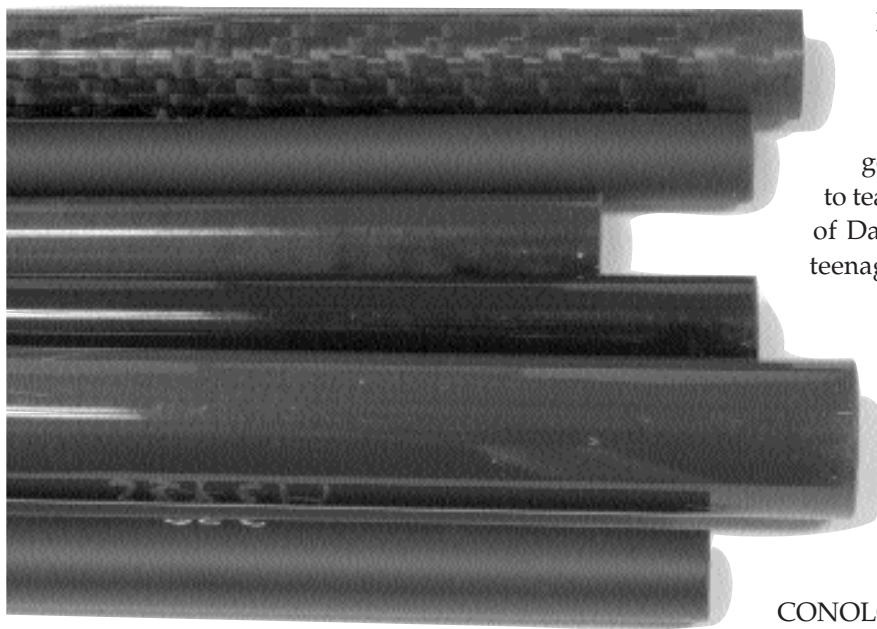
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Tom Kirkman  
Publisher RodMaker Magazine

# Ye Olde Rod Blanks

The introduction of carbon fiber rod blanks in the mid 1970's ushered in many new companies but also witnessed the demise of many others.

Almost 50 years ago I made my first rod using a blank made by Schoff. It was a yellow fiberglass blank and I used blue and white thread. The handle and butt ferrule were from Featherweight and the guides were probably from Mildrum, maybe even Foulproof. And there was Sila-Flex out there in Costa Mesa making factory rods such as the 116-Med I treasured when I got one and they were selling lots of blanks. I built many rods on the Sila-Flex BC-60-HF.



Herter's was selling blanks, - no way to know who made those. Herter's was important, sold a lot of stuff.

Just months before I started in the sporting goods field I was using Herter's fiberglass canoes to teach boating to kids. Once made a trip from north of Dallas to the Gulf with 6 Herter's canoes and 11 teenage boys. Tiring!

But there was no Fenwick or any of the names that came along later. No DURA-FLEX..... Of course there were a lot of guys trying to get in the rod biz. I have an incomplete list here and it is a page and a half! Did you ever hear of an outfit called NARMCO in San Diego? They did National Rod Company and then did Conolon and later sold CONOLON to Garcia for a bundle. GARCIA-CONOLON, - remember? Note:

CONOLON was the name of a fiberglass material developed by CONVAIR during the big war. Dr. Glenn Havens of Vultee Aircraft, later Convair when Vultee merged with Consolidated in 1942. And down the road a piece there is the patent in 1946 of the Howald Process, the patent assigned to Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co. The famous Shakespeare white fiberglass rods were made on the HOWALD PROCESS. So Dr. Arthur

Howald and Dr. Glenn G. Havens are, to a great extent, responsible for developing the epoxy-fiberglass processes that resulted in all of the fiberglass rod blanks and that ultimately brought about the carbon-fiber fabrics we call GRAPHITE.

But all of that and much, much more was long before GRAPHITE, - "carbon fiber." And BORON!!!

Jimmy Green was at Pedley in Santa Monica and out of that came PRAM, Pedley Rod Analysis Method which was the basis for Fenwick's Power/Action Graph. And the still formidable DON GREEN did GRIZZLY and it became FENWICK. My friend Don left Fenwick and went waaay out on a long, limber limb and formed a fledgling new company and called it SAGE. Keep in mind that ALWAYS, in the background, there was a lifelong close association and great admiration going on between Jimmy Green and Don Green. Sadly, Jimmy is gone.

Gary Loomis worked at LAMIGLAS. I sold great volumes of Lamiglas in fiberglass and later in graphite. In time Gary left and did LOOMIS COMPOSITES. Later he formed G. Loomis, Inc. I sold a lot of that too.

Down there in Dallas I was trying to get Phil Clock, prez of Fenwick, to make a line of blanks for me under my own label. Then graphite came along and I had a guy named Harry Behrle from Arkansas whispering in my ear.

In my old address book from those days there is an entry in the back: Harry and Jim Behrle, PLEPJOHN, 501/741-7500. That's Arkansas. Harry Behrle wanted to make a line of high quality graphite blanks under my label. By doing that he could compete with the big houses like Fenwick. So I told Harry to label them with a list of model numbers I had prepared and named them DURA-FLEX. Of course I started to beat the drum for my new product. And they sold like hot-cakes. Plepjohn means something but I don't know what. They made a lot of rod blanks for me. Behrle Manufacturing Company. There were times he would deliver in his truck and collect on the spot !!! All newcomers operate on a well-worn shoestring. I know I did.

There were scads of players. Exxon, Rodon, Hardy Brothers, Phenix, Russell Peak, Heddon, St. Croix, Roddy, Lake King, Powell, Pflueger (made by Shakespeare), Horrocks-Ibbotson, Hagen, Vince Cummings, Browning, Biscayne, Sabre, Hurricane, Action Rod, Fuji, Browning, Phillipson, Pedley and many others.

My friend and former employee (long ago) and long time Fenwick executive Vic Cutter gave me a lot of help with this rod blank retrospective. He is the best I know of, far superior to me in knowledge of the rod blank biz. So he is the one I asked for some background I didn't have and he was willing to spend the time, - and I thank Vic for his valued assistance. ✍





# WISHBOOKS

Fewer and fewer rod building component suppliers print catalogs these days. At one time, nearly all did.

About 1960 I was working as a “utility salesman” for the company that makes DICKIES pants, shirts and so on. It was my job to go to any sales territory in the country that was vacant (no sales rep) and fill in and get the territory working again. One territory I covered 2 or 3 times was made up of Montana, Wyoming and about half of Nebraska. Too much territory, too few people, - so it was hard to make a good living there.

There were towns on U. S. Hwy 30, - if that is right, - following the North Platte River. In one of these towns, maybe Kearney or Ogallala, there was an open account, **CABELA’S FURNITURE AND HARDWARE** and the man who owned the store carried a good stock of the **best DICKIES** khaki pants and shirts. It is a long time but I remember his store and where he kept the stock of our goods. I would make an inventory of his stock and would agree on a reorder. Mr. Cabela was a good merchant, steady and successful. Always good for a nice order. And he had 2 sons I became acquainted with. Jim was the older of the 2. Just out of high school. These boys had acquired a building in a weed-grown lot across from their dad’s store and it was an abandoned square telephone switching building. Jim said they were in the mail order tackle business. I went and looked and most of what I saw on the high shelves was Japanese chest-high boot-foot waders. But there was tackle. And they were shipping orders and making money. They had a catalog and it is my memory they were printing it on the High School mimeograph machine. This country boy learned a lot that day. Spend as little as possible but get the offering in the hands of the prospect. Not all will buy and maybe not right now but enough will buy to make it pay off.

More than 10 years later I wrote a little catalog, maybe a dozen pages. Boyd Robinson did the graphics and set the type, - for not much money. I had this commercially printed but I collated the pages on my bed. I wrote articles in fishing publications in trade for small ads offering my catalog. But I also prepared some larger standard size ads. And if closing came they might run a much bigger free ad if there was unused space available.



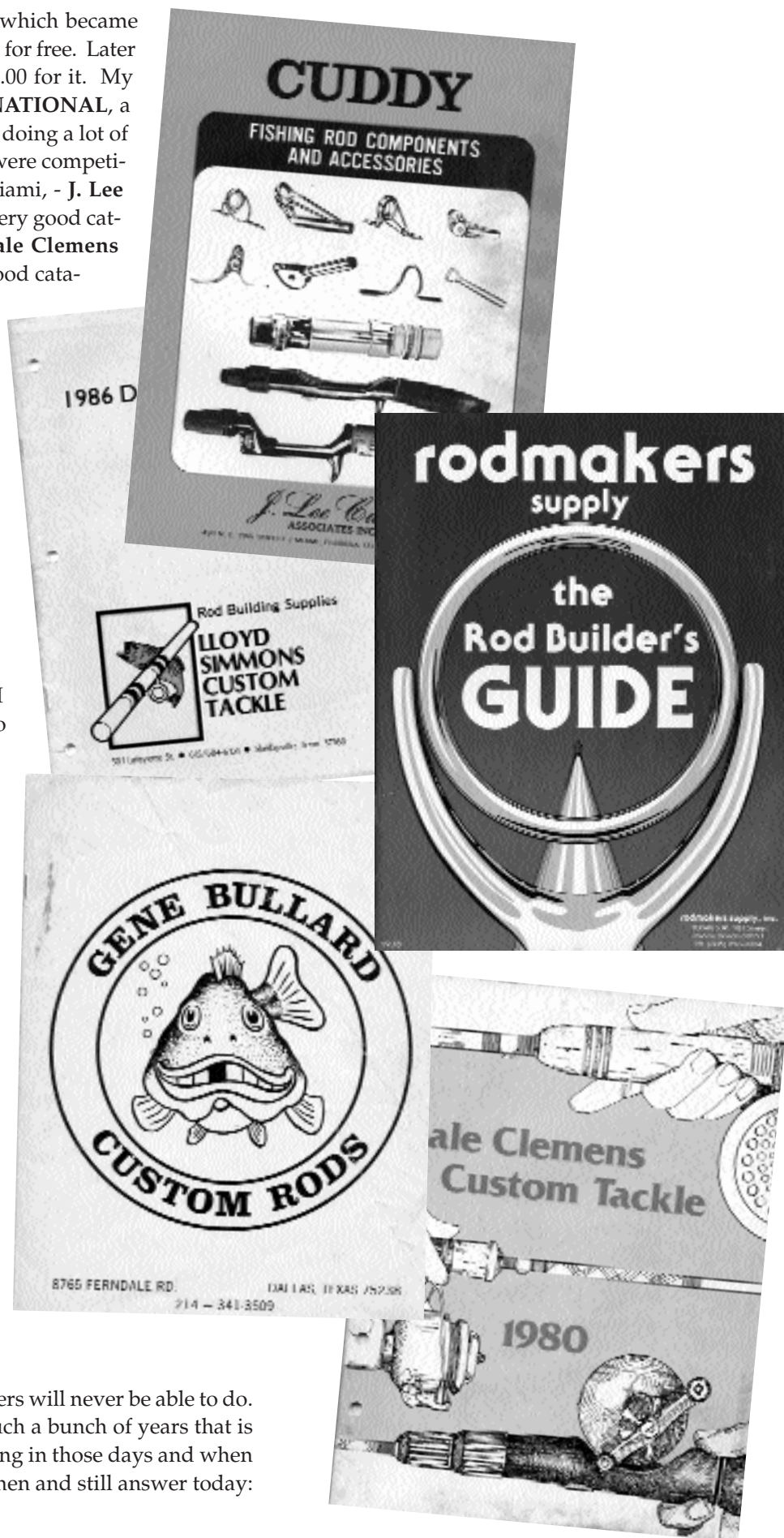
Later I had the Snaggle-Bass logo which became famous worldwide. Lee Houser did it, - for free. Later when I could afford it I paid him \$500.00 for it. My company became **BULLARD INTERNATIONAL**, a division of Gene Bullard, Inc. We were doing a lot of things and making money. And there were competitors like the big salt water house in Miami, - **J. Lee Cuddy Associates**. They published a very good catalog and I soaked up every word. **Dale Clemens** joined the fray. And others. All had good catalogs. I tried hard to make mine the best.

**Cabelas's** showed up and **BASS PRO SHOPS**. **Jim Cabela** had grown up and located in Sidney, Nebraska and was publishing a slick, deluxe catalog, - a great selling piece. He is probably the most successful, most profitable company in the mail order business, - mailing **ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY MILLION** catalogs this year.

Most houses use the internet today. Few pay the cost of publishing and mailing a print catalog. At my peak I was mailing 140,000 catalogs of up to about 150 pages. That costs **BIG MONEY** up front. Some houses print and have a site on the net. When I was doing it there was no **INTERNET**. Now there is and just a few are printing. **MUD HOLE** is printing, so is **ANGLER'S WORKSHOP**. And **JANN'S** too. Very few others.

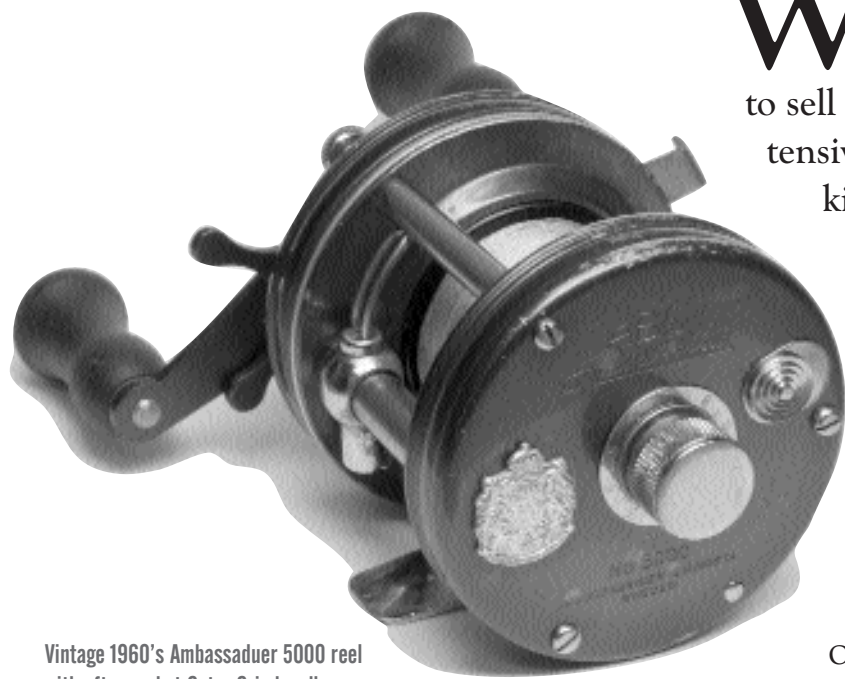
There came a time when I bought a photo typesetting system for about \$50,000 and that meant I had to go into the typesetting business. Of course this PC will do that work today, maybe better. From my experiences I think it is likely that the big houses like **CABELA'S** and **BASS PRO SHOPS** have in-house publications departments and it seems likely they have in-house 4-color printing capability, - all the bells and whistles. Now it is all digital cameras, and new-fangled typesetting and probably new kinds of four color presses.

There is one thing I did that the others will never be able to do. I still do it the same way today from such a bunch of years that is an ingrained habit. When the phone rang in those days and when the phone rings here now I answered then and still answer today: "**Gene Bullard.**" 🐟



# Ambassadeur 5000 Sales

*The tackle has changed but custom rod building is still very much shaped by the reels the angler uses.*



Vintage 1960's Ambassadeur 5000 reel with aftermarket Gator Grip handle.

When I went to work at THURMAN RANDLE & CO. in downtown Dallas in 1958 they didn't hire me to sell fishing tackle but to manage their extensive camera department which sold all kinds of very expensive cameras. That was my specialty. I had been working several years managing a camera and greeting card outfit in New York. One large and 5 smaller stores and a photo lab. And teaching photography and easy freshman English composition on the side at UNION COLLEGE.

On returning to Texas I managed a summer camp for boys a few months and then took 11 of them on a canoe trip to the Gulf of Mexico, paddling and portaging on the fairly thin TRINITY RIVER. We did it.

And then I needed a job and was hired by this sporting goods outfit. There I met the redoubtable Fred Thompson. He was a real master with a casting rod and I got him to teach me some of the tricks and got him to take me fishing. I wanted to learn to catch bass and he was the best and he taught me and I learned to do it about as well as he did. For example, he would bump-cast a practice plug into your shirt

pocket at the length of the store and almost never miss. I learned that. And then he did this thing with a casting rod that sold a volume of those \$45.00 Ambassadeur 5000 reels. At noontime he would go out on the corner and take a regular Sila-Flex 116-Med rod and a regular length handle and an Ambassadeur 5000 reel loaded with 14 pound Gladding Rapid-Caster line, - and would easily wrist-cast a 5/8 ounce practice plug a solid city block down Akard Street. You shoulda been there to see it run, - and run and run.

It sold reels like crazy. And we were buying as a master distributor and paying \$16.41 for the reel.

There was a secret. A sort of "potion." Fred had made a little reduction gear device to slowly rotate reel handles all night. In late afternoon he would take an Ambassadeur apart and grease it with the "potion." It was half Colgate's toothpaste and half reel grease, a good brand. Left to work all night it would truly make a reel as slick as a whistle. Toothpaste contained an abrasive. And that was the key to wrist-casting a city block with very little effort. He would clean up the reel and very lightly OIL it (no grease) and it was ready to amaze the onlookers. Lots and lots of big time businessmen ordered a dozen or more reels. A company president might say "send a dozen rods and reels just like that to my office". And we knew who he was and where his office was located.

There were not a lot of guys building rods for people but Fred did and he was the one who taught me to wrap thread on fishing rod blanks. I learned to do it better than he did and taught it to tens of thousands of others.

We used that familiar Featherweight handle (or sometimes the Heddon PAL handle) and a few models of the very dependable Sila-Flex blanks. T-3, T-5, (for tournament casting) and BC-60 F and BC-60 HF for bass fishing. BC-60 HF was the same as the 116-Med we used almost exclusively. Sometimes we used the very lightweight FOULPROOF wire spinning guides but mostly, even way back then, we used the MILDRUM Carboloy ring guides. Other and better guides came much later. And other and better blanks came later but in those heady days not long after the big war we were buying and building rods on what we believed to be the best available. And even today, almost half a century later, I would happily and effectively use those very same fine old rods, - and how I wish I had not let my old rods and reels get away from me. 📌

*There was a secret.. a sort of "potion." A company president might say "Send a dozen rods and reels just like that to my office. And we knew who he was and where his office was located.*





# MAGIC MOMENTS

## A MAJOR ERA OF CHANGE FOR ROD BUILDING

It was more than just moments but it did not last a long time, - maybe 25 years. And it was done by men who were different than any who will come after them. I was one of those innovators and I want to tell you about it. The fishing rod became greatly better than it had been for all the centuries and much better in every way.

Rule #1: If some hands have money to spend there will be other hands to take the money !

World War II was the precipitating event. There were endless numbers of research projects and out of that mess came useful products for the fishing rod industry. Drs. Arthur Howald and Glenn Havens were prominent leaders in the development of tubular fiberglass shafts. From this came durable and pleasing fishing rod blanks. Others, mostly in the aircraft industry, were doing similar work. Much of it was centered in the area of Seattle. Numerous rod companies continue to be in that location.

The Howald Process patent came in 1946. Others were busy or getting busy. The BENSONS were making fine rod guides in East Berlin, Ct. MILDRUM. Milt Stevens was working on making much better rod handles, butt ferrules and center ferrules. FEATHERWEIGHT. George Hine came up with truly superior chrome plated reel seats and gimbals, largely for big game and other salt water rods. It was natural that he would then make good rod butts using these. VARMAC. J. C. Axelson designed a line of roller guides for light salt water trolling rods. Axelson Fishing Tackle Mfg. Co. AFTCO. And in due course Milt Shedd bought that and redesigned the guides and then came up with great improvements on the heavy classes of trolling rods. Milt was my good friend, a truly fine man. And so is his son Bill who runs AFTCO today. Milt also founded SEA WORLD.



.....and we didn't know it but there was a ceramics engineer in Japan who would create a revolution in fishing rod guides. RYUICHI OHMURA. His Fuji Kogyo Co. would show us some new tricks, - later.

But, - most of us agree that the rod blank is the heart of the rod and there were a lot of men working on new rod blanks. Let's look at some of these. Some of them are still around and I am in contact with some of them. The blanks they created were turned into rods by fishing guides and fishing camp owners and there were a few guys like me making a few rods to sell. HERTER'S sold a lot of blanks and it is likely that most of these were made by J. Kennedy Fisher. The first of my rods was on a blank by a man in the Seattle area named Clarence Schoff who was a retailer but made lures and flies and began making rod blanks. There are Schoff blanks around today.

And then I began making rods for myself and to sell and the blanks were made by SILAFLEX. That was done by Herb Jenks and Lee Harter working at Costa Mesa, California. They gave away a lot of rods to people like me who worked in the sporting goods trade. They gave me one and put my name on it. They also gave a nice little fly rod to a young fellow in the Montana trout country and he loved it. TOM MORGAN later, in 1973, bought and operated the R. L. Winston Rod Company.

Dick Snyder was a PAPA BEAR. He started a company named LAMIGLAS. Over a period of time that company employed and trained such successful people as DON GREEN and GARY LOOMIS. Snyder went to GATORGLAS in Florida and then to Australia. LAMIGLAS continued and was a great success.

We know Don Green went on and created GRIZZLY rods and it became FENWICK. He was a moving force at FENWICK and later left to create SAGE. Gary did LOOMIS COMPOSITES and later formed G. LOOMIS, Inc. I sold countless tens of thousands of blanks by FENWICK, LAMIGLAS and G. LOOMIS.

There was a guy down at Foley, Alabama named LEW CHILDRE and he was popularly known as THE CANE POLE MAN. He imported and sold great numbers of first quality cane poles and supported a family doing that. Then he managed to get appointed the sole importer-distributor of FUJI GUIDES.

Well, - off he went !!! He finally had a really good brand to work with. And he came close to taking over the rod guide trade. All of the top quality guides you see today are descended from that early SHG guide. And more things were on the way. Handles, rods, reels - all sorts of stuff. Childre's sales reps were serious people and they called on the trade and sold the goods. I became the world's largest dealer in FUJI goods. RYUICHI OHMURA often visited my Dallas offices but Lew Childre never did.

So, - what did I do ? I was a little guy, a nobody in the tackle biz. I worked in my apartment, building rods on the kitchen table. My contributions to the craft were the development of the fancy thread wraps such as the chevron and double chevron, diamond and double diamond, - and the very difficult double diamond turned around, - not tied off. Of course I discovered the first one-coat thread finish. And I introduced the EVA rod grips to the market and called them MOUSESKIN. And then, out of necessity, I came up with the idea of shipping rod blanks in PVC pipe. I discovered that I could do this for less money than the cost of 5-panel corrugated cardboard boxes. By buying a "lift" I could buy the pipe for 12.43 cents a foot. And one more thing. I actually made a living building and selling fishing rods. Not a lot of builders had successfully done that.

To me, looking back, those were MAGIC MOMENTS. I am honored to have been friends and to now be friends with so many of these exceptional men. They did some very big and important things and I did those things that were within my grasp and my ability. 🎣

*There was a guy down in Foley, Alabama named Lew Childre and he was popularly known as "The Cane Pole Man." He came close to taking over the rod guide trade.*

# Pistol Grips

Once The Most Popular Of All Casting Rod Handles, They Are Nearly Non-Existent Today. Why Did They Disappear?

**I**t was started by my old friend Milt Stevens, the crusty owner of FEATHERWEIGHT PRODUCTS.

Milt was my friend and my long time supplier but he was a really fine engineer and a good fisherman and was a great student of the casting rod. And he was there on the scene in the Los Angeles area when the fiberglass fishing rod blanks began to be produced.

Milt developed a line of rod handles and butt ferrules for these rod blanks and began to sell them to rod manufacturers who wanted a quality handle. That included such quality makers as SILA-FLEX.

My first good rod was a Sila-Flex 116-Med, a 6 foot medium action rod in brown fiberglass. It was fitted with a Featherweight butt ferrule and a Featherweight 6-A straight handle.

But Stevens was a good hand with a casting rod and he knew that a straight handle was not the very best thing for accurate casting so he developed the 7-A "all angle" handle. The grip was adjustable and could be set to offer many angles. I bought one and thought it worked very well. But I and others wanted to do better. I began, as others were doing, to attempt making what we called "pistol grips".

My idea was to use standard size and very large size cork rings. Others all over the country were also doing the same sorts of things. And some of the rod factories began making pistol grip rods. They had engineers and equipment. Later there came handles like the Fuji pistol grip type and it was a much better seller than the Fuji round-grip handles. Featherweight came up with a line of semi-soft plastic pistol grips. And some small-time makers showed in the market with similar grips. Fenwick had rods and rod handles with cork pistol grips. And so did many other manufacturers.

By about 1980 my sales reports showed a general decline in pistol grip models. Not a big decline but a thing to watch. Of course the factories see these things too. And it turned out that the trend was real.

Pistol grips, for some reason, were no longer the hottest thing going. Within a few years they were just about a thing of the past with MOST rod makers and rod users.

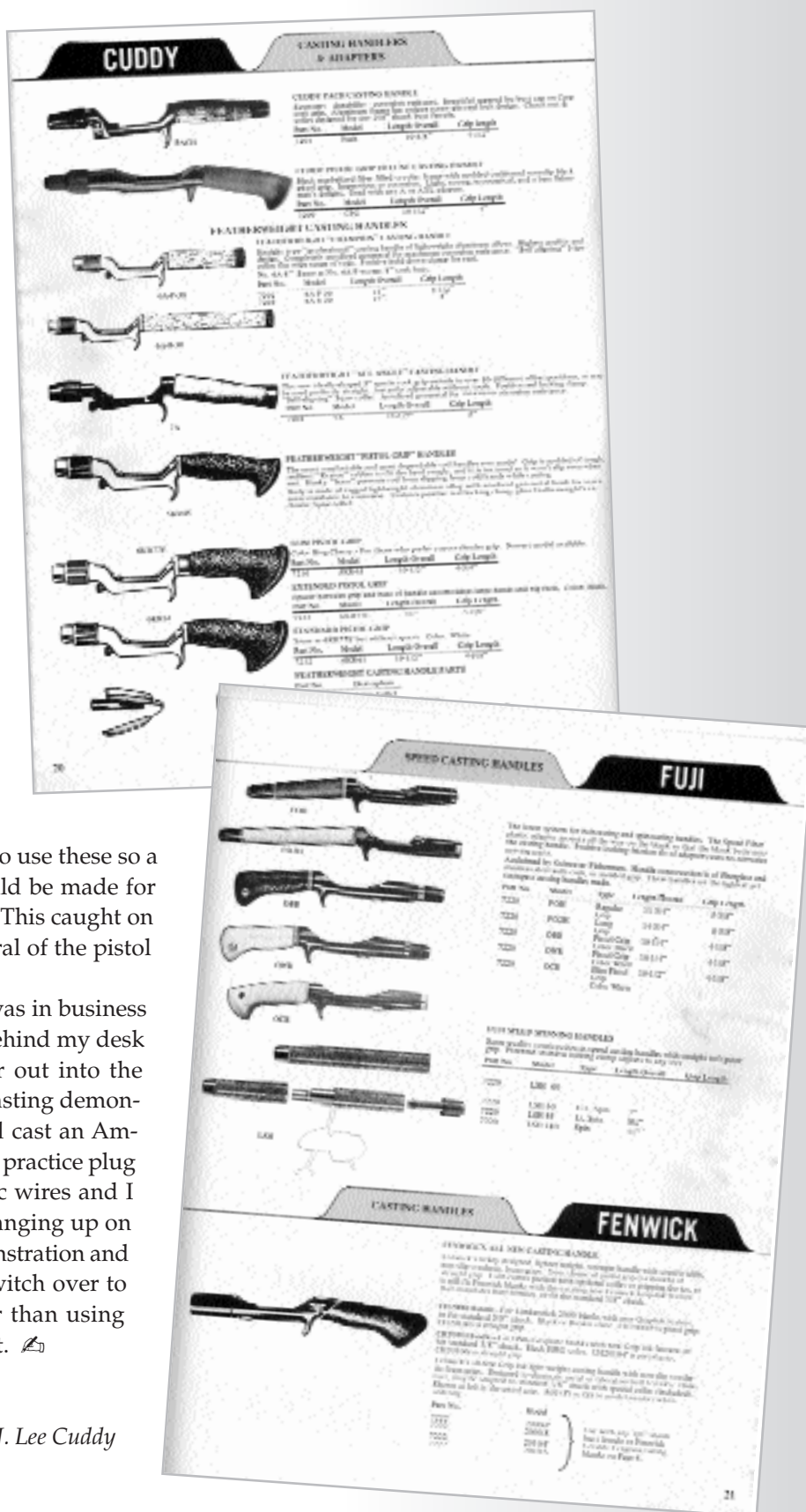
So, why was that? I think it was several forces working. FIRST and always, people can and do make new choices and discard old ones. They like change. Not only that but there is also the amount of time needed to make a rod with a handmade pistol grip. And they may not have been as durable as they should have been. And this: Trends are not made by a few highly expert makers. Trends are made by the mass of such people as custom rod builders. Very few of them are high powered experts.

And then there was a new thing available. HYPALON. With it you could quickly, easily and cheaply make a straight-through grip setup. Trigger reel seats such as those from Fuji were very handy.

Then came the EVA grips such my own MOUSESKIN and similar materials from other sellers. These grips were inexpensive, easy to install and durable. Factories were supplying a good variety of blanks to use these so a good, durable and pleasing rod could be made for less money and much more quickly. This caught on quickly and it was close to the funeral of the pistol grip.

During the first 8 or 10 years I was in business I would always have a rigged rod behind my desk and I would often take a customer out into the alley back of the store and make a casting demonstration. He would see that I could cast an Ambassador reel "dry." The 5/8 ounce practice plug would soar over about three electric wires and I would demonstrate how to avoid hanging up on them. This was an impressive demonstration and it encouraged a lot of builders to switch over to the straight-through method rather than using accessory handles, pistol grip or not. 🐣

Catalog Illustrations are from the 1977 J. Lee Cuddy blank and component supply catalog.





# Where Are They Now?

A nostalgic look back at the people who made one rod building supply business so special...

When I started in the rod parts business in 1971 it was just me working in my Dallas apartment. Of course it soon became apparent that I couldn't handle it alone so I hired Barbara Houser to help me. She was the wife of Lee Houser, the graphics artist who did my fish logo "Ole Snag." Barbara picked the goods for orders and did the packing and post office trips and the like. Both of the Housers have degrees and Barbara is very bright. They are retired in Richardson, Texas.

After a year I was forced to move into a business location and soon I hired more help and made Barbara manager. The first hire was **Mike Tombs**, a neighborhood 18 year old. He was a little odd but was smart and willing and was with us a good number of years. I have no idea where he is now. Wish I knew. But I soon hired **Tim Grennan**, a good salt water tackle man who was working in a tackle shop in Louisiana. And I hired my niece **Silvia**. Fenwick hired Grennan away after several years and that finally folded. I don't know where he is. Probably working in some tackle shop. Silvia is a long time executive with Continental Airlines and I hear from her often. **Keith Martin** was with us a few years and then left to work for E SYSTEMS. I had worked for that company several years as a photographer. They sent him to the Outback of Australia where they had an installation. He was there a few years, returned to Dallas and then went back to Australia. I don't know where he is.

During that time I hired a youngster, about 14 or even younger. **Don Eisenstein**. He was razor sharp and worked very well, did anything we asked of him. He is now a PhD and is a professor at U of Chicago and has a very good consulting business, apparently makes a lot of money. I am in regular contact with him. We always had some neighborhood teenagers on staff. One of them, a sweet and pleasant boy was fairly shy. He is now manager of a Sherwin Williams store in Dallas, - has three or four kids.

There was a youngster who came in with his older brothers beginning when he was about 12 years old. **Dan Bunday**. Later he came to work with us and was a trusted and capable worker until the last day. I was particularly interested in him. Dan moved to Galveston and began working on party boats and I stayed after him to get a license to run a boat. Finally he did and I stayed after him to get a more advanced license. Today he has a full captain license and can run any boat up to 100 tons anywhere in the Gulf of Mexico. He is in regular contact with me. Dan is now 44 years old, married. Dan Bunday is a fine man and has been of great value to me.

The two key people in the company were **Dan Thompson** and **Joe DeLeon**. Barbara finally left and I appointed Joe General Manager. He is a Mexican who actually did come across the river at age 3. He often says he is not a "wetback" but is a "sandfoot" because he crossed when the Rio Grande was down. Joe is a man everybody likes. His father was a blue eyed blonde and his mother was a fairly dark Indian with no English. Joe served as buyer, manager and did whatever needed doing. He was with us all the way. He is now an account executive with a Dallas area fabricator of steel parts and is a tool and die company. I should note that Joe DeLeon is a naturalized citizen. He is perfectly fluent in English and was educated at a high school in Garland, Texas where he was a very successful football player.

**Dan Thompson** was our money manager and did all the computer buying and everything of that sort. He is a crackerjack man with numbers and details. He paid all the bills and payroll, handled the mailing list on his computers and generally did whatever was required that had to do with money and information. When we bought an expensive typesetting system it was Dan who operated it and produced our catalogs and other printed materials. He even did custom typesetting jobs for others. Dan is the son of Fred Thompson, the man who first showed me how to wrap a rod. Today Dan Thompson is an executive with Hewlett Packard in Houston where he lives with his wife Kim.

There were a lot of girls. In general they did not stay around long. Two are memorable. One of them was a girl with a truly spectacular body. She and her successor were

both from my home town. The latter of these two was a pretty girl who is chiefly memorable because her teeth were in bad shape and I paid a dentist a lot of money to fix them. She left soon after.

We had a customer in North Carolina who was a saltwater tackle builder named **Vic Cutter**. I got him to come visit us and hired him. He was with us several years and then was hired away by Fenwick. He was with them quite a long time and then when that came apart he worked at this and that and then established a shop of his own. He married, maybe more than once. Vic Cutter is among the best tackle people living. He seems to know everybody and everything. He is now sales manager for Pacific Bay.

There were the interesting Laotians. We had several. One, **Boonthong Lotakoon** is memorable. He was a likeable young fellow and did a good job. He was a shipper. We had sophisticated automatic mailing equipment and he quickly learned it. Then there was **Gaudencio Pascua**, a Filipino about 70 years old. I think he is gone now. We loved **Dencio** for his unflagging good humor. And he always showed up.

**Mike Tombs** was the son of a fishing guide who drowned in the overflow flume at Lake Texoma. I still think it was pretty strange that Mike chose to work in the tackle field.

I think this was the best staff of people ever assembled to do a job of that kind. I trained every one of them with great care, taking a lot of time with every one in order to be sure they not only knew but also knew why. They were required to be experts. Any of the English speakers could handle any phone order and they often did.

I respected all of these people and still do. But there was one who was a thief and stole a lot of money from us. So I haven't mentioned him. Interestingly, when I sent him away he began working in the rare coin department of a large department store.

There were others but this is the most interesting part of the group who did the work over the years. 🐦

*Gene Bullard was the proprietor of Bullard International Rod Building Supply in Dallas, Texas from 1976 to 1987.*

# Pricing Custom Rods

If you sell rods to the public, heed the advice given by one of custom rod building's most savy businessmen

Regardless of your skill level, - making a custom rod now and then and selling it is one thing. Making rods every day to sell for the purpose of buying beans, bread and shelter, - well, that's a whole nuther thing. You need to get really serious when you make rods for a living.

I made rods and made good ones for more than five years before I started to make them for a living. I did good work and had a good name for making a quality product. In those years there were a lot of rods called "worm rods." These were tough, stiff, heavy action rods. I didn't make those without an order. What I did make were rods that were a joy to fish and were especially a joy to cast. Not many really big fish are hooked.

So I made rods that were fun to use and that would easily handle the fish actually being hooked. My customers liked the rods I made and they talked about it.

I lived in a very nice 2 bedroom 2 bath apartment in an upscale area of North Dallas and didn't want to move. So I needed to make and sell quite a lot of rods. I would sometimes GIVE a rod to a friend but I never DISCOUNTED the price of rods. If you sell a rod to your friend and sell it cheap he will broadcast that fact. Don't do it. It is cheaper to give it to him than to sell it cheap.

I had some customers who wanted plain vanilla, very short and very strong rods to use in new lakes in Mexico. One in particular ordered rods a dozen at a time. I made them well but plain vanilla and sold them fairly cheap. Over a period of time this customer bought many dozens of rods. AND, - he sent me dozens of good customers who paid the full price. He was RON SPEED, owned the biggest of the outfits offering trips to the new lakes in Mexico and trips to other places. We are still good friends and in regular contact.



Rule #1: If you make really good rods you should sell them at a premium price. Don't try to compete with the factories. You cannot do that.

Rule #2: Become well known. During this growth period I often did programs for bass clubs. I did 313 of those club programs, first just in Texas but then in Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma. It was common for me to find myself 200 miles from home and all alone at 11 p.m. Fortunately gas didn't cost 3 bucks then. But I was serious. I was trying to make a living. So I did anything I could do to sell rods, sell myself and sell parts to other people. I had discovered that I was about to be in a big business selling parts.

But I kept on building good rods that were not only good looking but were pleasing to use. I had developed the fancy diamond and chevron wrappings and I had the one-coat finish that was so well received. But I tried very hard to make not even a very small error. I studied every method I was using and took the time and trouble to do it as well as it could be done. I would throw away any rod that had an error of any kind. Quality MUST always be the first consideration if you want to sell at a premium price.

I know a good number of professionals and yesterday I asked one to tell me about his pricing. He makes mostly fly rods. He gets \$600 for a plain vanilla rod and it runs up to \$1,500 or more for a fancier rod.

Obviously this rodbuilder has built a reputation for making really good FISHING TOOLS. He doesn't miss a trick. Everything has to be just right. For example, he buys the very finest cork available and discards much of it as not being good enough for his exacting standards. He buys the best blanks and will send one back if it is not up to snuff. So sellers are careful to send him good stuff. It is a good point.

My friend John Bradford of Fort Worth makes probably the best split cane fly rods available anywhere. His rods start at \$1,895 and he is 2 years behind in finishing his orders. If you make the best you can get more money for your work.

In the sixties, say 1968, I was making mostly bait casting rods. My good rods were \$150 and that was quite a lot of money then. But I made casting rods for as little as \$50.00 and made money on them. Many of the rods I made were fiberglass and I still believe these were the most pleasing to cast and to use.

I used ONE ROD almost exclusively during those many years and it was made on a blank I bought in a side street hole-in-the-wall rod repair shop in Louisville, Kentucky. My reputation as a great bass fisherman was largely earned using that rod. With it I once caught 8 bass over 8 pounds each in a day on a little Texas lake. That blank was a "second," a really flawed blank. But it was strong and responsive and did a great job of casting the #9-S Rapala I used almost exclusively. I would pay real money to have that rod again but you probably wouldn't take it as a gift.

So, - building a custom rod is about making a rod better than your customer can buy in a store. It should be MUCH BETTER than store-bought. So it should sell for much more than the inferior store-bought product. Get a premium price for your knowledge and your work. 🦅

*If you make really good rods you should sell them at a premium price. Don't try to compete with the factories. You cannot do that.*

# Measurements vs. Judgment

Measure or eyeball it? Here's some food for thought...



We all measure and I have always made sure of necessary measurements when building rods. Mostly I used a machinist's caliper and depth gauge, plus a 6 inch metal ruler. And somewhere I kept a seldom-used rollup tape.

But I mostly didn't measure. Instead I used my experience to make judgments about where guides should be placed and how many guides to use. And how to do the wrapping to produce the diamond or chevron patterns. Of course I saw the books and magazine articles laying out exactly how to measure and mark to arrive at the thread crossing points. But I knew these rod blanks were tapered so that made such measurements wrong from the beginning. I felt better if I did it by eyeball and nobody ever made any complaint. My work was good looking and accurate done by eyeball.

Of course there is the issue of guide spacing and how many guides to use. Here it is a good idea to take a look at how the factory handles it on the same blank. Fenwick, for example, was using 6 tungsten carbide guides made by Allen on such rods as the 6 foot medium casting rod. The weight of the extra guide softened the power just a little for casting. That allowed the rod to pleasantly cast a greater variety of lure weights and it caused no disability in handling a hooked fish.

Using this information as a general guide I could alter the "power" of a rod to suit the casting weights I had in mind for the rod. If the guides are closer together close to the tip then the rod will be a little softer. And spreading them out made the rod seem to be stiffer. Same blank, different characteristics, from changed guide spacing. Of course trimming the tip was a drastic measure and would greatly stiffen the resulting rod.

So the next question he pondered aloud was what is it that makes one rod worth \$500 and another only worth \$150? And that is, in fact, the \$64,000 question that far too many custom rod builders never take a hard look at. Let's assume for a moment that two rods are equal in functionality. I'd like to think that any custom rod builder offering rods for sale to the public is up to speed on the latest in rod performance and efficiency and how to build a rod that is easily the better of any commercially made product. No doubt this isn't always the case, but let's continue with the idea in mind that we're talking about high performance rods built with the best of modern materials, techniques and methods. So again, what makes one custom rod worth \$500 and another custom rod only worth \$150? Very often, it's a combination of many otherwise little things that are obvious both consciously and unconsciously to the buyer. The rod has to look good. It has to look worthy of the asking price. A good question to ask yourself is this - if you were the customer, what would *you* be willing to pay for one of your rods? If you can be truly objective for a moment, you may find that the price you're willing to pay for one of your rods is far less than what you're expecting to receive from your customers for the very same product.

So just what are those little things that a customer would notice and factor into what he or she is willing to pay for a rod? As it happened, the local builder I was speaking with had a couple rods in his truck that he had picked up from a local tackle store for repair. They were custom rods built by another local builder. Not to pick on that builder, but I had the rods brought in and we took a hard look at those rods to see if we could locate those little things that often make the difference between a high and a low selling price. And we found quite a few.

For starters, the pre-formed cork grip didn't mate well to the reel seat. It was only a tiny bit uncomfortable where the cork was smaller in diameter than the seat where the two met. But perhaps more than that, it just didn't look good. Nor was it concentric. There was more reel seat overhanging the grip on one side than the other. A casual glance might not reveal this so obviously, but somewhere inside the sense of aesthetics that most people have, it just didn't look good.


Moving on to the butt of the rod we found a pretty obvious and thick glue line between the grip and butt cap. It had seeped out during the installation and the builder either hadn't noticed

it or just didn't bother to remove it. Either way, it certainly did nothing to add to the perceived value of the rod in any reasonable customer's mind.

The guide wraps were certainly functionally sound. The epoxy coating was perhaps a bit heavy and not exactly level. Not bad enough to raise any red flags and certainly as good as most commercially made rods. But again, not what most customers would expect to see on an expensive custom rod.

Keep in mind that each and every detail on a custom rod contributes to the final and overall "look" of the product. Do enough little things haphazardly or carelessly, and the overall appearance of the final product will reflect this. And... discerning customers, those willing to pay top dollar for their equipment, will certainly notice it.

I've had similar conversations with builders who asked me for an honest evaluation of their rods. When I point out little trouble areas such as those mentioned above, they get a little defensive and say something like, "My rods are built to fish with. They work fine and I'm not worried about little details that don't make any difference in how they fish." Fair enough. But keep in mind that if you only strive to build a rod that is utilitarian in nature then you should not expect to receive a price that is any more than most would pay for a purely utilitarian product.

Sure, some customers don't have a good eye and some are willing to pay additional money just to get something "custom." But such rubes are few and far between and not all custom builders are lucky enough to stumble into them very often. True, there are those guys who have a lot of money and don't mind throwing it around without great concern about what they're actually getting. Again, they don't exist in great enough numbers that you're going to run into them on every street corner. The fact is, most reasonable consumers do look hard at items they consider buying and have an instinct as to whether or not a product is worthy of its asking price. And it's those little things, those seemingly insignificant details, that often tip a purchase decision one way or the other. If you want to sell your custom rods for larger sums of money, then you simply must pay attention to details. On an open and often highly competitive market, they count for more than you might imagine. A utilitarian product only commands a utilitarian price while a precise and carefully crafted product commands a great deal more. Which one are you building? 



# In the Beginning...

The “good old days” of custom rod building offered a very limited selection of blanks and components.



My first rod was built sometime in the fall of 1958. I had spent the entire summer managing a boys’ summer camp on a lake about 20 miles northwest of Dallas and needed a job. So I went to work for a very nice and fairly upscale downtown Dallas sporting goods store. The company also had a wholesale house and more than a dozen traveling salesmen. It was THUR-

MAN RANDLE AND COMPANY and it was my understanding that Mr. Randle was in the pokey for running guns to Cuba or somewhere. Probably Winchester model 70 rifles.

*...you could not buy butt caps.  
We and others listed “crutch tips”  
and the like.*

We did a lot in guns and tackle and sports clothing but I managed the spiffy camera department. And, as I could, I learned the gun and tackle business from Fred Thompson and Frank Harris who headed those departments. They were really experts and I learned well.

Fred was a very skilled fisherman and he taught me to build rods. We had Sila-Flex blanks and some from Shakespeare (Howald process), - and some from Heddon and a few from Schoff. Guides were from Sila-Flex and Mil-drum and we had some boxed sets from Foulproof.

Across the river in Oak Cliff there was a shop called Smitty's Sporting Goods. He had blanks and handles and guides and thread and I later bought quite a lot of stuff from him.

Now Dallas is a big city and it is in fishing country but there were only 2 outfits in town that had the parts to build a fishing rod. Two – in a large city.

Then there was a company called Herter's, a mail order house. They had some rod parts and they sold a lot of that kind of stuff to fishing camps and guides and so on. Their stuff was pretty good. Dependable.

Today you have a great many choices. There are more rod blanks, thread types and colors and far more kinds of guides than there have ever been before. And any number of other specialized items that were never heard of or thought about when I was in the business.

You can build any rod of any description and it can be plain vanilla or of any choice of fancy descriptions. Far and away better than anything I ever tried to do.

But all of this is recent. Back in the days..... you could not buy what you wanted but might have to buy a blank and trim or extend it. Then Fenwick and Loomis began to make a really good variety, 2 to 4 different lengths of every respective design. I carried in regular stock EVERY MODEL of both brands.

And you could not buy butt caps. We and others listed "crutch tips" and the like. I got the bright idea of making butt caps and thought I could sell a lot of them. So I first found out what material would be best. Then I got hold of a mold maker and had a pair of 6-cavity molds made. Costly. There were plugs to put an image on the inside of the butt cap. I had plugs made with my snaggle bass logo and with concentric circles and I had some blank plugs. So, with my logo, I had 2 sizes in three colors and I could easily make others by changing out the image plugs. These sold well in my catalog and I sold many thousands of others with the bullseye design or no design. This was a very good profit center. After all, every business must make a profit or quit.

I mentioned these 2 stores in Dallas. But if you lived 200 miles away you were in for a trip if you wanted to build a rod. Those stores did not ship. And even when I was in business in the 70s and 80s I very often had visitors in from Europe and Mexico and most anywhere. And we got mail and phone orders from all over the world. We had it and would ship it and there was no other source.

But that was then.....

*Today, you have a great many choices. There are more rod blanks, thread types and colors and far more kinds of guides than there have ever been before.*

# Color Preserver - X

One of the most popular color preservers in rod building history, it also provided one entrepreneur with a bit of “great fun.”



Not much changed in the color preserver area from 1958, when I started making rods, and whenever I brought out CP-X, a completely new chemistry and new approach.

Threads had not changed but finishes had changed. I did Diamond One-Coat, an epoxy that did a good job in one coat. But the color preserver was still the same and it had the same old problem: It would crack at the end of the guide foot and that would crack most finishes. After all, it was just a clear lacquer.

I had been working with a guy in northern California and he was a pretty good chemist and he understood what I wanted to accomplish. My chemistry background was in photographic chemistry and was not of much value in this field.

That went on, back and forth, for about a year. And then he sent me a few bottles of different samples. They were all milky looking and I was not much impressed but I began to test these samples, all by myself. Then I got



some of my staff to test them. I had already decided which one I thought was the best, - better by far than anything I had ever used or tested. The one I picked I had marked on the cap with an X.

All of my staff people chose the same one. So I wrote instructions for the bottle and sent them to the guy in California and he soon came up with printed bottles and I ordered a quantity of stock by phone. He was just about to make a lot of money. And I would make money too. Better yet, - this was a whole new direction in the rod building business.

This was a complex chemistry and it was some kind of latex in a water suspension. I never did learn how it was made. Maybe I didn't need to know. It went on the threads milky and dried clear and was flexible, - never did break at the end of the guide feet. You could call it dissolved clear rubber, suspended in water.

The water, of course, had some problems. Sometimes a shipment would freeze and when that happened it was a disaster. The water would freeze and the latex would precipitate and fall to the bottom. It did happen to some shipments. When we got that complaint, and there were not too many of them, we would ship the order again. That kept the noise down to a reasonable level. I don't remember any case where the shipment went bad twice in a row.

This was a major change, an upheaval in the rod building supply trade and it was not a thing that could be easily copied. Some of the big companies tried to copy it and some tried to buy the name and formula from me. Of course I didn't have the formula so I couldn't sell it. I don't think I ever admitted that to any prospective buyer. Great fun.

The man who did CP-X is not among us any more and I miss him. I don't use his name. He loved to be around tackle people and he loved to be the man who developed a great and grand improvement. I was happy to get him a ticket to the AFTMA show, wherever it was held, and he showed up every year. Of course that tackle show is not what it once was. No longer does Fenwick have a big area to show and write orders. Lew Childre always had a huge FUJI exhibit but Lew is long gone, lost to the world through a plane crash, - his plane and Lew was the pilot. Farewell old friend.

For me it has been a long and eventful run. Lots of excitement and lots of hard work and lots of success. 📌

*"Of course I didn't have the formula so I couldn't sell it. I don't think I ever admitted that to any prospective buyer. Great fun."*

# Shorties

Once upon a time, casting rods were very short. As the years have passed, rods have gotten much longer. Why?

My first fishing rod came into my possession when I was about ten years old. It was a mess. The material was tubular metal, probably beryllium copper. All of the running guides were unattached. They had been soldered to the shaft and had broken away but were present. I wrapped these agate guides back on the rod and soldered the result and they stayed put. This rod was a fairly heavy action and about 4-1/2 feet long. There was an old Pflueger SKILCAST reel and I did my best to put it in good shape. Soon I was casting and caught a fish now and then. I had made myself a LUCKY 13 lure. It weighed at least as much as the usual 5/8 ounce for factory lures. These lures were the norm and they were the reason for the short, stiff rods and the usual 25 pound test black braided silk line. That was well before we saw nylon of any kind.

That worn out old rod was given to me by a neighbor named Pete Seagler. He and very few others cast lures to bass. I watched one of them, George Suber, and he usually caught bass. I learned. And there was a man named "Runt" Golmon who went out of his way to teach me and I kept learning. As the years passed I became very good at picking up a string of bass pretty quick.

Then, - more than 20 years later, - I found myself living in Louisville, Kentucky and fishing in Lake Dale Hollow on the Kentucky - Tennessee border. The man who owned the marina and hotel was a good fisherman and he taught me to use the very light lures such as my favorite, - the RAPALA 9-S.

To cast that lure well I needed a long, whippy rod. I bought a blank and guides in a hole-in-the wall rod shop in Louisville and made the favorite rod of my life. It was almost 7 feet long. I wrapped the guides on with 10 pound monofilament. Works just fine. Good to use for repairs in the boat.

When I was in the business I sold untold thousands of rod blanks to build 5-1/2 foot rods. Today such blanks are not often seen.

Why are rods longer today? Easy, - lures and lines are lighter so rods are longer. Short, stiff rods don't cast light lures well. There is always a reason when the market changes.

And there are items like Fenwick's old FLIPPIN STICK. It was an early one and was pretty heavy. But it was seven feet long and such rods made a difference in what was selling.

The old time lure standard was 5/8 ounce. I remember that even before 1940 these sold at \$1.35 in the hardware store. Even in the tiny village where I grew up they were in stock in the store. Of course I could not afford to buy one so I did my best to make a copy. It caught a fish once in a while and I was thrilled. If you go to that same store today they will probably not have those old heavy lures.

For a long time I was something of a "purist." I used Ambassadeur reels and lines of 15 pounds test or more. But I found that I could catch more and better fish using a light lure, a long rod and a spin-cast reel. My choice was the Abu 170. It has now been retired and is on display. And I sure wish I could get that old "whippy rod" back again. All my friends built such rods after seeing what I could do with the one I had.

The tackle market buys what it wants. If the fishermen want to cast heavy lures they will buy short, stiff rods. But if they decide they can do better with light lures they will buy longer, lighter rods.

Look as long as it takes and buy what you want. 📝

*When I was in the business I sold untold thousands of rod blanks to build 5-1/2 foot rods. Today such blanks are not often seen.*

# Hot Melt Cements

For a brief period of time, Hi-Temp Hot Melt adhesives challenged the “new” epoxies for dominance in rod building. The Hot Melts ultimately lost, of course, but not without a fight.

When I began building rods in 1958 it was simpler than it is today. My thread holder/tensioner was a proved design made

for me by my friend Fred Thompson. I could buy a really good blank with a butt ferrule already attached by Sila Flex. A few spools of Gudebrod thread, a razor blade and a set of the good SRC guides made by Mildrum and I was all set to go.



would DRIVE a practice plug in a good breeze.

That was before the days when I began doing diamond wraps and all that. What I wanted was a first class FISHING rod.



When the wrapping was finished the problem popped up. HOT MELT CEMENT. I was buying a resin block from Sila Flex, didn't know any better. The problem with the resin was that it was subject to vibration and, in time, it would be powder inside the tip-top tube. Not useful.

Years later I sold large quantities of a softer hot melt from Gudebrod. It was pretty fair for the day. But there simply were not any very good Hot Melt Cements. So we began using epoxy..... Well, that is a problem. You must really heat it very hot to get the top off. Damages the blank material.

One day I just got good and mad and out of patience. So I began to study. And I found that many products are made with high quality HOT MELT CEMENTS. Many of those products are shoes or shoe parts. So I began to ask for catalogs and samples of the materials. I had to have a usable product that needed no complex machines to apply it. Just a torch or even just a match. It had to kill off all the problems like tip turning in a hot car and it could not powder like resin did. And it HAD TO BE USABLE WITH NO FANCY EQUIPMENT. Truthfully, - ALL of the industrial applications used high powered equipment. So I just wanted to see samples of stuff that would fit into OUR INDUSTRY.

The first sample changed my life. I had found the HOLY GRAIL, a HOT MELT CEMENT that melted at a reasonable temperature but that would not get overheated in a car in the summer and allow the tip-top to turn. I went through a great many samples and finally arrived at 2 cements, one of them a stick like I had been selling and one of them a cement in a roll.


Everybody has to make a living. I had sponsored a young woman who was trapped behind the IRON CURTAIN in Poland. I had brought her out and did what I could do to help her earn a living. So I developed packaging for these 2 products and got her to do the production and the packaging and I bought the products from her so she earned a profit. I sold it in my catalog.

Of course others were looking on and soon there were new products all over the place.

I am just as vain as you are. I want to be known as an innovator. I like it that I get credit for developing the fancy wrapping patterns. And I like it that I get credit for bringing in the first ONE COAT finish.

There were other things. I happily take credit for finding the way to ship rod blanks, - and do it cheap.

I found a way to buy 1-1/2" diameter PVC pipe, - and found a way to buy CHEAP caps. The breakage was just about over and done.

I like it that, FOR THE ROD PARTS TRADE, I am the guy who so happily discovered the new HOT MELT CEMENTS that were so successful and completely changed the market. 

*I had found the Holy Grail, a hot melt cement that melted at a reasonable temperature but that would not get overheated in a car in the summer and allow the tip-top to turn.*